

# Preview

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She walks the streets of Melbourne in a wedding dress, an overblown meringue with a cardboard sign hanging from her neck: "Nanna, I'm still alone."

Anastasia Klose is pathetic. The 29-year-old VCA graduate puts herself in humiliating situations and by videoing the experience transforms her wretchedness into art.

Though it might sound like an exercise in emotional masochism, it has also seen her picked as one of the leading lights in the next wave of Australian artists.

"I guess from an art perspective I'm quite successful, but in terms of my personal life, it's a bit of a joke," she laughs.

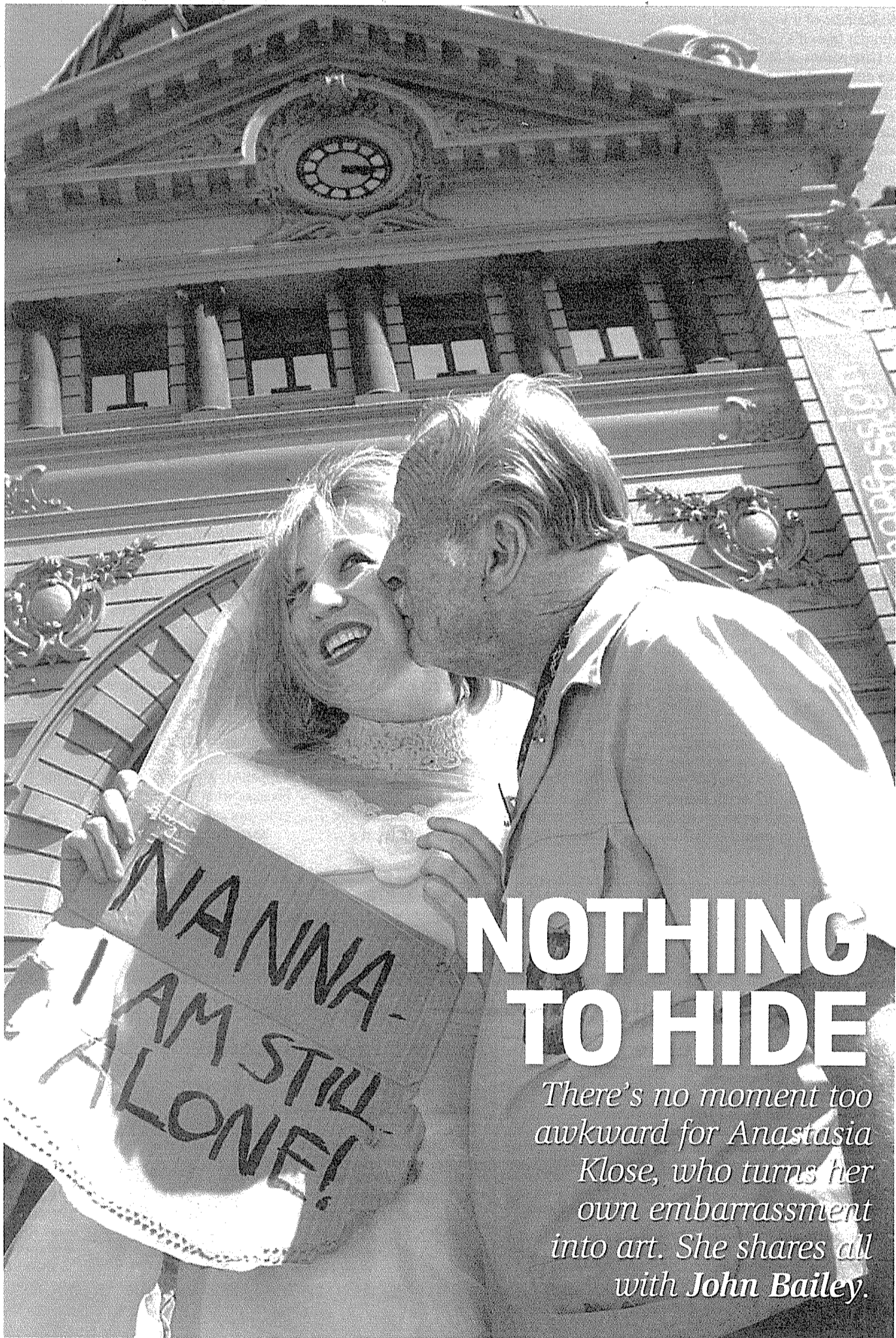
Klose really is "still alone". And her brave pursuit of the art life probably won't help her love life in future. Klose's exercises in self-humiliation aren't so far from the cringing thrills elicited by the self-destructive behaviour of the Jackass crew, or even the schadenfreude of watching Borat subjecting himself and unwitting bystanders to the most embarrassing public displays. But those shows deal with physical or social humiliation — it's hard to imagine Sasha Baron Cohen allowing himself to be as emotionally vulnerable in public as Klose.

One video involved a miserable, anti-climactic attempt to have sex with a fellow student in the disabled toilets of the Victorian College of the Arts. But if *In the Toilets with Ben* sounds pretty raw, its sequel is even worse. *Mum and I Watch In the Toilets with Ben* is exactly what it sounds like: Klose and her mother sitting awkwardly on a couch, viewing the earlier work.

"I was so uncomfortable," says Klose. "I was dying inside and my mum was too. But that, of course, was the main reason to do it: just to see if I could bear it. It's pretty embarrassing. I mean, you don't want your mum to know you have sex — god, no one does. It's humiliating. But that humiliation is what interests me."

Klose's videos are a feature of NEW07, the annual exhibition of fresh talent at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. ACCA's artistic director, Juliana Engberg, sees the work positively.

"There's this nice tension in the work that I think updates feminism, but not in a very negative way," she says. "She's a positive victim, if you like. I think one of the things that comes through in her work is her strength of character. She's not in fact the forlorn character that she casts herself in, because, ultimately, she's controlling her own situation very



## NOTHING TO HIDE

There's no moment too awkward for Anastasia Klose, who turns her own embarrassment into art. She shares all with John Bailey.

PICTURE: JUSTIN MCGMANUS

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precisely. And I think that's a very positive message to be sending out there."

Klose doesn't know who first described her practice as "the aesthetic of the pathetic", but admits that it's an apt term. She points to the roots of "pathetic" — pathos, the appeal to emotional sympathies in an audience.

"Pathetic is a term that's very glib these days. You can write something off by saying it's pathetic," says Klose, "but think about pathos. It says a lot about life. The tragedy and the suffering and the humanness of things. Which is not glib, and not trite. It's true."

The pathos of Klose's art doesn't carry the grandness of tragedy. Her main subjects are simply her own failings, in relationships, the workplace or everyday life: "Just banal suffering, not epic suffering. Just continual, quiet, low-level suffering."

Maybe that's what's so subversive about Klose's work. Though we might be fascinated by the fall of the famous (Britney shaves head! Robbie skips rehab!), we don't have much time for the moaning of the madding crowd. The Australian way isn't the way of the whinger, the moaner. The "quiet, low-level suffering" of the ordinary person mostly goes unnoticed, and we prefer it that way. Put up or shut up.

Klose's works don't look like high art. She shoots on a Samsung camera she bought for \$300, edits on the most basic program available, and even the titles of her films are in the default font that came up when she began editing.

"I thought, 'That's perfect,' because it was just the most generic, average font there is."

But, as Engberg puts it, each video's "appearance belies its sophistication and I like that complexity within the work".

If Klose's work appears artless, even naive, it's deliberately so.

"I love to make work that anyone could make, but I love to make it in a way that only I could make. It's kind of a paradox . . . But, even then, anyone could do it. It's not about money, quite the opposite. And that is democratic."

Klose's rise has been rapid. She began working in video less than two years ago and, unlike many of her contemporaries, didn't grow up with a camera in hand.

"No, I grew up with a television. I



think that's better," she says.

Klose's father was a painter (he's now a director) and her mother a sculptor. As a child, she was taken to her fair share of exhibitions, which helped instil a healthy distaste for the very word "art". "I just hated it. I really didn't relate to the art and thought, 'Oh god, as if I'd want to be an artist. What does it all actually mean? I had really negative associations with the word.'"

After high school, she did an arts degree at Melbourne University ("What you do when you don't really know what you want to do") and had her fair share of "crap jobs". She then commenced a degree in public policy — "My whole family was going, 'You know, you could be the one that will have a professional career!'" — but, after a year, found the experience lonely and unfulfilling.

"I didn't have a purpose in my life," she says. "I needed to find a reason to function. It sounds melodramatic, but I kind of really needed a reason to live."

Surprisingly, she found that, although she'd grown up hating art, there was more to it than she had realised.

"It sounds so grandiose, but art fills that gap. It fills that gap for a lot of

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people." Her first video was entitled *Slaps*, in which she and a male friend took turns slapping each other in the face. Hard. It turned her life upside down.

"I was so scared because I'd done something seemingly outrageous. I felt, 'Oh my god, what will people think? Will they think I'm endorsing masochistic behaviour or encouraging self-harm?' Of course, I wasn't. I really just wanted to experience that feeling."

And video it.

"Yeah. Unrehearsed. Just as it happened. A work like that can't fail, because what's happening, the immediacy of it, you can't go wrong."

But, when she first screened the video

at an opening for friends and classmates, she was shocked to discover some viewers reacting not with horror or concern, but by cheering.

"These were guys I knew, we were all friends, but they'd had a few drinks at the opening and they were like, 'Heeey!' every time I got slapped."

It sounds like the sort of thing that would have some people re-evaluating their friends, but this response excited Klose.

"That's really interesting, isn't it? People are so attracted to suffering. It's true. I don't know if you can get too moralistic about it. I don't want to say it's the failings of humanity or anything like that. But it's definitely interesting."

Since *Slaps*, Klose has continued to put herself in awkward positions for the sake of her art, and it's taken her far. Are there places she wouldn't go?

"Sadly, probably not as many as there should be, you know! I mean, I made that wedding film and I said to my mum, 'I'd like to get married just to turn it into an artwork'. You start to live your life for your work. You put your work ahead of your own needs and maybe that's not always the best way to live. But it's what you do."

Will the recognition of an ACCA exhibition mean that Klose will no longer be able to draw on her life's miseries as subject matter? "I'll never achieve fortune, I can tell you that right now. And as for success, it doesn't change the whinger in me; it doesn't change the kind of unhappy person in me."

There's the paradox of Klose's practice. If there's one thing that makes her happy, it's her art, itself based on "the unhappy person" she is, on the personal life she describes as "a bit of a joke" but which, once shared, becomes something else.

"When you have these ideas, whether they be parading down the street with a bit of cardboard around your neck or actually having sex with someone for the sake of an artwork — if you think of them and you do them, it's wonderful, it's incredibly empowering. You can do whatever you want."

*NEW07* (with works by Damiano Bertoli, Christian Capurro, Nick Devlin, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Anastasia Klose, and Brendan Lee) is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art until May 20.